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SPECIAL FEATURE: Tributes to Mary Oliver, 1935-2019

Tributes to Mary Oliver, 1935–2019

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Mary Oliver (September 10, 1935–January 17, 2019) was a poet known for her interpretations of the natural world. She grew up in Maple Heights, Ohio, and attended but did not graduate from Ohio State University and Vassar College. As a teenager, she lived briefly in the home of Edna St. Vincent Millay in Austerlitz, New York, where she helped Millay's family sort through the papers the poet left behind. Oliver's first collection of poems, *No Voyage, and Other Poems* (J. M. Dent & Sons), was published in 1963. She went on to publish many more collections of poetry. Oliver won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1984 for her collection *American Primitive* (Back Bay Books).

She contributed to *Appalachia* for three decades. Poems that she sent first to this journal appear in her books, many of which Beacon Press published. In the next five essays, we hear from two former editors-in-chief—Sandy Stott, who first invited Oliver to send us her work, and Lucille Stott, who worked with her here for six years—and Parkman Howe, poetry editor, who worked and corresponded with the poet for a baker's dozen of years. The next two essays come from a writer who found herself entertaining Oliver one afternoon and a young writer who never met Mary Oliver but, in the poet's death, felt a great loss. Last are two new poems dedicated to Oliver's memory, by Todd Davis and John Smelcer.

A red fox in the White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire. Mary Oliver imagined a fox's inner thoughts in many of her poems. JONATHAN DANA

Gifts

Sandy Stott

In the winter of 1988, Mary Oliver came to Concord Academy, where I was working as a teacher, as that year's Hall Fellow, the annual two-day, speaking and teaching engagement that honors the school's formative head, Elizabeth Hall. Some months earlier, Oliver had accepted our invitation, a pinch-me moment. My favorite poet would be teaching and reading at my school!

That feeling intensified when I was asked to introduce Oliver at the reading. Her poem, "Sleeping in the Forest," had captured—truly—my experiences sleeping in woods and on mountains, and I began my introduction by citing it. Oliver then rose to read . . . and began with "Sleeping in the Forest," which opens with these lines:

> I thought the earth
> remembered me, she
> took me back so tenderly, arranging
> her dark skirts, her pockets
> full of lichens and seeds. I slept
> as never before, a stone . . .

I felt blessed.

A year and some months later, my 41st birthday drew near. The school year was underway, and I was immersed in it. Late in the day, I collected my mail, which included a thick manila envelope. I glanced at the return address, and my heart rate jumped. "Oliver," it read, "Provincetown, MA."

The saying goes that you don't get to choose your parents; a corollary might be this: You do get to choose your heroes. Should life and its choices align just so, you may be lucky enough to find these two categories coalescing on occasion. The contents of this envelope announced one such occasion once I'd learned how they had arrived for my birthday.

Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Concord, Massachusetts: the kind of subtle natural landscape that inspired Mary Oliver. DAN STONE

Here's what I found inside:

A note from Oliver wishing me a happy birthday and sketching out the story of how she knew from my father that it was drawing near. The envelope's heft came from the second enclosure, a blue chapbook, Oliver's *The Night Traveler*. Another birthday greeting filled the blank first page: "For Sandy Stott, With many good wishes for your birthday, 29th September 1989. Here is a poem I thought you would like—it will be in the next book."

Across from that greeting, on the inside cover in black, handwritten ink, I found a poem, "Some Questions You Might Ask." It began, "*Is the soul solid, like iron? / Or is it tender and breakable, like / the wings of a moth in the beak of an owl? / Who has it and who doesn't? / I keep looking around me*."

I looked around me. Mystery intensified.

How, I wondered, had my father found Oliver and persuaded her to send on this perfect gift? The two people could not be more unalike—my father, Fred Stott, extroverted and evident; Oliver, reclusive and quiet. Still, I reflected, as I read on in the poem, neither shies from what is. Both ask hard questions that invite the world in, and both feel plain lucky to be able to go out often into its woods and wild lands.

"Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg? / Like the eye of a hummingbird?" I read. *"Why should I have it, and not the anteater / who loves her children? Why should I have it, and not the camel? / Come to think of it, what about the maple trees? . . . what about the grass?"*

Still filled with questions, I reread my gift. It multiplied.

I sent on thanks, and a while later I wondered in a note if Oliver might send us a poem for *Appalachia*. She would, and over time, her work became a recurring high point in our journal's pages. Each newly arrived poem or piece of prose was a gift to be savored. Each gift took me back to that birthday, reminding me that I was lucky in parents, wise in hero.

Sandy Stott was the editor-in-chief of *Appalachia* for ten years. He edits the journal's Accidents section and is the author of *Critical Hours: Search and Rescue in the White Mountains* (University Press of New England, 2018).

Warming the Winter Hours

Lucille Stott

A bookmark has, for years, kept the page ready for my returning. Lately, I've returned more frequently than usual. In her collection of essays and prose poems, *Winter Hours*, published in 1999, Mary Oliver saves the title essay for last. Although universal in its themes of suffering and resilience, it feels today as if it had been written just for us, just for now, and it never fails to awaken fresh resolve.

The essay is startling in that it casts hope not as Emily Dickinson's "thing with feathers" but rather as a feet-on-the ground warrior, fierce and rebellious:

> In the winter I am writing about, there was much darkness. Darkness of name, darkness of event, darkness of the light of reason. I would speak here of the darkness of the world and the light of _____. But I don't know what to call it. Maybe hope. Maybe faith, but not a shaped faith—only, say, a gesture, or a continuum of gestures. But probably it is closer to hope, that is, more active and far messier than faith must be. Faith, as I imagine it, is tensile, and cool, and has no need of words. Hope, I know, is a fighter and a screamer.

I still recall my surprise, and my "aha" smile, when I read that last sentence. By the time she wrote it, Mary had become a frequent contributor to *Appalachia*. Over the years that I edited the journal, from 2000 to 2006, I knew her to be kind, generous, and humble. We would laugh at her sometimes whimsical use of commas, and I understood that I must remind the printer—every time—that her line breaks were to be unfailingly honored, even if that meant adjusting the typeface or leading. She was gentle in her manner, unyielding in her art, shy with people, daring with words. Knowing those things allowed me to see her unusual characterization of hope as perfectly suited to her worldview. And, as I'd realized so often on reading her poetry and prose, I knew she had gotten it right.

Mary understood, perhaps too well, that in disruptive and disheartening times, the temptation is to withdraw, to leave the fray and retreat into our work, our routines, our selves. When I read this essay for the first time, I was all too ready to do that. But her words jolted me out of that dark place and kept me from sinking passively into some doughy mess of faux comfort:

> Sometimes I think if I were just a little tougher made, I would go altogether to the woods—to my work entirely, and solitude, a few friends, books, my dogs, all things peaceful, ready for meditation and industry—if for no other reason than to escape the heart-jamming damages and discouragements of the world's mean spirits. But, no use. Even the most solitudinous of us is communal by habit, and indeed by commitment to the bravest of our dreams, which is to make a moral world. The whirlwind of human behavior is not to be set aside.

Although Mary claims that retreating into solitude would be the "tougher" thing to do when cruel forces threaten, her choice—to commit, to confront, to participate—demands much more of us. She doesn't deny the pain we endure—the grief, the despair—but she urges us to view "struggle and rising as the real work of our lives."

As I read and reread her words, I continue to find strength in Mary's insight. A warrior-poet, in her way, she found her weapons in love and nature. If we're brave enough to sustain hope ourselves, we're smart enough to understand that it isn't light and airy; it's the armor we put on to face the day's battles, our own and the world's. Although she is gone, Mary's words will forever keep reminding us that our only real choice is to fight on.

Lucille Stott was the editor-in-chief of *Appalachia* from 2000 to 2006 and remains a contributing editor. She is the author of *Saving Thoreau's Birthplace: How Citizens Rallied to Bring Henry Out of the Woods* (TMC Books, 2018).

Telling the Bees

Parkman Howe

When I assumed the poetry editorship of *Appalachia* in the early winter of 1992, Mary Oliver had already submitted her first prose poem, "The Gesture," to the journal; it appeared that June. Her first poem for us, "The Instant," appeared in the next issue: a lyric about a fleeting encounter with a small snake that fled in the time it took a heart, Mary's heart, to beat twice. During the first fourteen years of her association with *Appalachia*, Sandy and Lucille Stott, former editors-in-chief, handled the relationship with Mary, since they had initiated it.

Then, in 2006, came the fraught moment when Lucille Stott was stepping down as editor, and I would have to deal with "Ms. Oliver," winner of the Pulitzer Prize and one of America's most esteemed poets, myself. My first letter to her asked for her approval of a biographical note that would appear with her poem, "White Heron Rises over Blackwater."

From then on, ranging from every six months to a year or so, a letter from Provincetown, Massachusetts, addressed on a distinctive manual typewriter, would magically appear in the mail, unsolicited. In all, Mary published 33 original pieces in *Appalachia*, plus a reprint of her "Going to Walden." Most were short lyrics about places, animals, birds; a few were prose poems. She wrote two remarkable pieces for our "Encounters" series in 2004 and 2005: "Bird" (for *Encounters with Light*), and "Walking Home from Pasture Pond" (for *Encounters with Silence*).

Almost immediately, we fell into a correspondence—about weather, houses, travels. She sent back my second letter with corrections of biographical note marked. At the bottom, she added a note announcing the death of her longtime partner, Molly Malone Cook, on August 26, 2005. In my letter, I had offered to send some jars of honey from our four beehives in Carlisle, Massachusetts. Mary had drawn an arrow beside the offer and written, "Oh, yes!" Thus I became honey supplier to the Oliver household.

Low tide off Cape Cod, a view Mary Oliver saw while working on her manual typewriter. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB/ART MORENZ

As I started shipping off 2-pound packages of honey to Mary, I began to receive in return clippings of news stories about bees and recommendations for reading, including *The Honey Trail* by Grace Pundyk (St. Martin's Press, 2008). I always received a thank-you note for each shipment: "Oh, honey! Yum and yum . . . gratitude." And, "What a treat! It's so dark, and rich, I thought that could only happen later in the summer. . . ." Mary was also aware of the darkening plight of bees across the country: "Oct. 1, 2009, Oh poor bees, what will we do?"

One thank-you note, written on August 15, 2015, prefigured one of her delightful prose poems about a black bear captured on Cape Cod, "Who Cometh Here?" (December 2015):

> Maybe you heard that a young black bear visited the Cape earlier this summer—swam the canal, roved through every town including ours, was seen at Wood End [Lighthouse] staring at the bay which I guess he knew was not a canal, then wandered back, took out and no doubt

> enjoyed a hive in Wellfleet, then was given a ride out of town. Oh that honey must have been so delicious to him! I am aware that I'm much like that fellow—accept the honey, enjoy, and wander on without a word. So this is my note of thanks, it is as usual so good.

Her thank-you notes took on the quality of short poems, as Mary's life in Provincetown gradually came to a close: "July 18, 2011. The honey is beautiful (can what you eat be beautiful—yes!) and I thank you very much. . . . We are fine down here [Florida], no lack of sweetness, but so very different!"

A few years later Mary was struck with cancer. She included a note with her poem "Cross the Road" (December 2016): "Sometimes life surprises you—after almost a year of chemo I am okay, but as tired as an old broom."

On February 2, 2011, Mary sent the following query: "Did you ever hear of that business that, when a death occurs, one is supposed to go out to the hives and tell the bees? Whatever it means, it sounds like a wonderful thing to do." She is referring to the old New England custom, imported from England, of draping beehives with black cloth and "telling them" when a beekeeper or anyone in the household has died. The best-known version of the practice remains John Greenleaf Whittier's "Telling the Bees," first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858. In the ballad a young lover returns to the farmstead of his beloved after a year's absence. He notes that a "chore-girl" has draped the hives with pieces of black cloth, and now she sings a melancholy song to the bees. The speaker assumes that his beloved's aged grandfather has "Gone on the journey we all must go!" But no, the grandfather rests in the doorway, his head on his cane. The chore-girl sings instead of the lover's own beloved: "Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence! / Mistress Mary is dead and gone!"

So, when I heard that our Mary had left us, I went to the bee yard, of course, and told the bees that one of the wisest, sweetest souls of all our days and lands had gone.

Parkman Howe is *Appalachia*'s longtime poetry editor.

What Might Surprise Mary?

Sandra Sylvia Nelson

In 1989, my husband and I found our names on a schedule saying we must entertain Mary Oliver one afternoon during her few days' visit to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. I was teaching and taking graduate courses at the time. My husband and I didn't know what to do with her: not enough time to go fishing, no money to take her to a restaurant. I called her and asked what she wanted to do. She said she was being fed right before we got her, so we were to "surprise" her.

What might surprise Mary? We had no idea. We only knew her poems. But we figured she might like a trip to our house in the heart of Milwaukee's highest-murder-rate zip code. We picked her up in our rusted-out pickup, squeaking and rattling all the way to 18th and Vine. She was skinny, so she climbed into the middle seat, usually reserved for children. I watched her look out the windows at a different kind of wildlife than she was used to. We drove past burned-out mattress springs used as fencing, porches balancing on two knock-kneed pillars and dangling gutters with the drip. When we'd stop at a light, the throbbing of music seemed to vibrate more rust off our quarter panels. An old Maytag washer stood on the corner grassy lot as we turned onto 18th. Mary took everything in without comment.

At the house I had prepared two "Mary Oliver pies": an apple pie made from fresh apples and a cherry made from canned cherries. She was indeed surprised when I told her we were having "Mary Oliver pies" and coffee. I showed her the pies with her name punched into the tops, the holes serving as the vents. Then we told her stories about the neighborhood as well as about our neighbors.

She was relaxed, never needing to rush her words. She laughed easily, as if she were an old family member. She never made one critical remark about our house or unmatched silverware. She loved her pies and commented favorably on the flaky crusts. I explained how to make flaky crusts and gave her the recipes.

We should have talked about writing. But writing is already doing the talking, so why talk about talking? The pies, the coffee, and the bright afternoon sun warming us through were all we needed.

Sandra Sylvia Nelson has published widely, including in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Northwest, Yankee, Tar River, The North American Review, The Iowa Review* and its anthology *Hard Choices,* and *Ms*.

Unraveling Lessons from Mary Oliver

Sarah Audsley

Winter is long this year: Flurries test the locals into May; the plow guy makes too many visits up and down our long dirt driveway; I gamble taking off my snow tires in late March; on a bad night driving home after a shift at the restaurant, I nearly hit a birch tree fallen across the road, its slim whiteness blending in with the snow curtain. On January 17, 2019, just home after graduating from my MFA program, two and a half years of rigorous study and writing, I call my best friend and sob into the phone. Mary Oliver has died; there is no consoling me. I pull all of her books off my shelf, make a pile on the coffee table, light a candle, and hold vigil. A friend comes over, and we read Mary Oliver's poems out loud to each other, passing numerous collections back and forth. Why do I feel this way? Never have I felt this way about someone I never even met. . . . The candle doesn't comfort, but my friend, who presented me with my first collection, *New and Selected, Volume II*, much loved and dog-eared but somehow misplaced in the many moves from apartment to apartment throughout my 20s, says maybe Oliver is reunited now with her dog, Percy. What I know for certain is this: I have clung to Mary Oliver's words; they have helped me get through rough times,

provided solace. Isn't that the best that poetry can do? The brutal realization is there will never be another new poem from Mary Oliver, not one more book—the available light in my hands is all that she has left us.

It took me a while to get here, but I know now I don't doubt the deep well and power of poetry, even after a memorable dinner, several years ago, with academic types at a prominent university. Sitting at the table, feeling inadequate and as if I don't belong, others begin talking about poets and their work. This is a typical conversation when a gaggle of poets gathers in any sort of critical mass, often in various English departments across the country, or at annual writers' conferences. Everyone has an opinion on the latest poems and books just out. Someone mentions Mary Oliver, and another scoffs, "Well . . . her work doesn't demand very much from the reader." Everyone nods.

Tongue flustered and flabbergasted, I don't know what to do or say. Inside my head, questions swirl. The validity of the argument seems hollow, especially when Mary Oliver's work has meant so much to me, not to mention to all of her thousands (millions?) of readers. At that precise moment I cannot articulate what I understand now: Unequivocally and without hesitation, I can say that I loved her. Perhaps the literati elite—to which she belonged but stood outside of, even after winning many of the top poetry prizes—should listen to some of her lessons again: "Attention without feeling is just reporting. You need empathy. Reporting is for field guides. It's not thought provoking. Attention is the beginning of devotion."[1]

As I have become more committed to my own writing practice, hoping for a fruitful relationship with the blank page but more often than not coming up against the hard wall of myself, I am beginning to understand more fully how committed Mary Oliver was to her craft. Her greatest gift to me is not her many volumes, to which I return frequently, a succor of carefully chosen words and lines, but it is her gift of the exemplary way she lived and sustained a writing practice over the course of a lifetime, which demonstrates to any aspiring poet what might be possible. The possibility of this thing, this pursuit of living a life centered around art, seeing, and paying attention. Still unraveling her many lessons, I rediscover the only thing she desired to arrive at, at the end of her life, was the feeling that "I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms."[2] The question remains: *What is possible?*

1 "Mary Oliver: Listening to the World," interview by Krista Tippett in *On Being*, February 5, 2015, https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/.

2 Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," *New & Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992).

May snow in New Hampshire's Franconia Notch: In the long winter of 2019, Sarah Audsley considered Mary Oliver's committed writing practice. SARAH AUDSLEY

At my desk, I'm flipping through my Mary Oliver library looking for her poem, the one that rises to the surface of my memory, about a speaker who receives a seed found in bear scat from a friend who knew she would admire it. Perhaps the friend never suspected just how much. The speaker takes the seed home and swallows it; lets what passed through a bear also pass through her. I cannot find the poem. I text my friend, who can't remember it, and I am agitated, pacing the room. Did I *dream* this poem? It represents such a striking confessional moment, a taking of an object from the natural world inside oneself, that even having read it years ago, its mystery, its strangeness, and the quality of the speaker telling me something about herself, some truth, preoccupies me. Finally, after desperately searching for it—this poem feels like the key to unlocking this very piece I have been asked to write—I find it in *Swan* (Beacon Press, 2010). The lines seem sparser than I remember, but

the affecting nature of the idea, and this moment of clarity Oliver captures, still strikes me as representative of how she strived to practice "living an examined life."[3]

I took it home

and did what I supposed
he was sure I would do—
I ate it,
thinking

how it had traveled
through that rough
and holy body.
It was crisp and sweet.[4]

In a rare interview, Mary Oliver professed, "I wanted the 'I' to be the possible reader rather than about myself. It was about an experience that happened to be mine, but could well have been anybody else's. . . . It enjoined the reader with the experience of the poem."[5] Listening to these words, especially after her death, validates my attraction to poetry that employs clear, fully embodied speakers.

In my own work, I am considering how to carefully craft the "I" in poems for my first poetry collection. As a Korean American transracial adoptee, raised in rural Vermont, now making my home and a living in northern New England, I look different and navigate questions from strangers asking where I am from, among many other assumptions and stereotypes. The extent to which I experience internalized racism is still something I am coming to terms with. It is like awaking slowly from a deep sleep, where the dream is just below the surface, just out of reach and unobtainable in the fully conscious state.

3 "The unexamined life is not worth living," has been attributed to Socrates.

4 Mary Oliver, "Tom Dancer's Gift of a Whitebark Pine Cone," *Swan* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).

5 From *On Being* interview with Mary Oliver, by Krista Tippett.

Turning to Mary Oliver's poems has always reminded me that where I am from and where I *belong* is walking in the woods, roaming in the mountains, swimming in the lakes and streams. (The woods do not speak the vernacular of microaggressions.) Mary Oliver taught me that rambling in the woods is working. She taught me, "Joy is not made to be a crumb."[6] The lessons I learned from Mary Oliver's life, and work, continue to be touchstones that I will hold on to tightly when I doubt myself as a poet, and as a person. I imagine letting them pass through me, internalizing her gifts, and letting the next poem, the one that has yet to be written, arrive like a seed passing through the body.

Sarah Audsley currently lives and works at the Vermont Studio Center and previously lived in New Hampshire's White Mountains region. She published poetry in *Alpinist 65* and received a residency at the Banff Centre Writing Studio. She holds a degree in poetry from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina.

6 Mary Oliver, "Don't Hesitate," *Swan* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).

Recitation

After Mary Oliver

April sun
melts the last snow,
warms what flows
upward, outward,
teasing buds
from the ends
of limbs.

Ivory-colored sacs
filled with eggs
float toward
the surface
of a vernal
pond.

Maple blossoms
pink the sides
of the mountain,
and soon serviceberry
will white the hollows.

At dusk we walk
to the edge
of the alder swamp
where frog song
envelops us.

For a moment
our presence
silences the wood
frogs, spring peepers,
even the water
that flows endlessly
toward the river.

I think of you,
your voice
disappearing.

When the frogs chorus
again, in the green
leaves of a black
willow the shape
of a heron tries to land.

Watching the bird's
spindly legs and broad
wings walk the air,
you ask what it means
to perch, to hold
still for a time,
then fly away?

Todd Davis

Todd Davis, a frequent contributor to *Appalachia* over the past decade, is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *Native Species* (2019) and *Winterkill* (2016), both published by Michigan State University Press. He teaches environmental studies at Pennsylvania State University's Altoona College.

Nature's Indefatigable Guide

John Smelcer

I got to know Mary Oliver through *Appalachia*. Over many years and issues, we were among the journal's staple of poets. For a quarter of a century, I had been poetry editor at *Rosebud* magazine. I thought our readers would love to read Mary's poetry, so I asked Parkman Howe, *Appalachia*'s longtime poetry editor, if he'd help me reach out to Mary. He kindly obliged, rightly asking me to keep her address confidential. Although Mary did not respond to my invitation in writing (I'm not sure she was writing to anyone in the last year or two), we did have a couple of phone conversations in which she thanked me for my invitation and promised to send me some poems for *Rosebud*—poems that never materialized. I have learned that her health was declining and that she was in no condition to fulfill her promise.

During the time I was communicating with Mary Oliver, I began teaching an online course called "Poetry for Inspiration and Well-Being." The course is offered through the Charter for Compassion, a global nonprofit founded by Karen Armstrong in 2008. In addition to compassion, Charter advocates for religious tolerance, discourse, nonviolence, well-being, and environmental stewardship. Hundreds of students from as many as 30 or 40 countries enroll in the course, which I teach in the spring and fall. I should point out that most of the students in the class are women. I cite Mary's poem "The Uses of Sorrow" in the course. Invariably, Mary's name comes up in discussions more often than any other poet, maybe with the exception of Robert Frost. It is clear to me from student comments that Mary's poetry touched countless hearts and lives around the world. We poets should all be so lucky.

Poet Maxine Kumin once wrote that Mary Oliver was an "indefatigable guide to the natural world." I like to think that, on learning the news of her passing, the natural world mourned the loss.

On Hearing the News

for Mary Oliver

Tonight I hear wolves howl sadly
from a dark mountain.

The blue river, gathering shadows,
flows swiftly through the starry night.

Listening to the windy pines
I know I am not alone in my sorrow.

John Smelcer

John Smelcer is the author of more than 50 books, including ten books of poetry. His most recent poetry collection is *Raven*, a project he began in 1997 with Ted Hughes.

What We Have Learned

Mary Oliver's unconventionality

Max Stephan

The year was 1994—late January, strolling through the university bookstore, not too enthusiastic about guessing how much the semester's texts would end up costing *this time*. That day—so long ago, I cannot remember which courses I was taking, nor how many books I had stacked in my arms. What I do remember, quite vividly in fact, is how one specific book caught my attention: *American Primitive*, a collection of poems by Mary Oliver.

The cover was lurid, dark: a blurred, black and white image of a forest alongside what appears to be a frozen, backwoods pond surrounded by barren trunks and leafless limbs, some drooping, others broken. No doubt: The image was creepy. I cannot recall if it was the cover that initially drew me toward the book, since it wasn't among the required texts for any of the courses I was taking, but as I paged through, what I found were poems about dancing snakes, mushrooms and moles, a stillborn kitten, trees on a hospital lawn, bobcats, bears, and bats—not what I had expected from the cover's cryptic image. Even more surprising, the words were common, none too fancy or ornate, but each line carried weight: heavy, genuine, and tangible.

After a few minutes, I took another quick look at the cover to see if I recognized the poet's name but, at that time, nothing clicked. The cost: $7.95. Most of the other texts I held sported price tags of $50 or more. "What the hell—why not?" I mumbled to myself as I added it to the stack.

In retrospect, I can identify that split-second decision as one of the fundamental, if not fate-driven, turning points in my academic career.

Twenty-five years later, almost to the day, news began to spread of the passing of Oliver—the poet whom I had discovered by chance, the voice that had become the core of my academic research. Reflections and praise honoring her work and accomplishments were heard around the world on January 17, 2019.

A red-tailed hawk on a fence post. APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB/DENISE HURT

Sitting at my desk, looking out the window, I began to muse: well over 1,000 poems in more than 20 books, the ways in which her work had changed over time, the topics she addressed and rejected. So, so much.

When I started to write this essay, I thought about concentrating on lines from poems that most have read: those printed on posters, sold in gift shops, selected for anthologies. I could have recited the basic words of praise voiced about "Wild Geese" or dug deeper into the true meaning of "Rice." But such are the poems the world already knows.

Yes—Oliver wrote about deer and dreams, fish and fall, rage, devoted love, and her dogs. She spoke of all forms of life: both flora and fauna, never too scientific, and not once identifying cells by genus and species. She let the reader make the connection—or not—with as much as they knew and understood about the snake or sparrow, vulture or violet, and she never attempted to boost her image with proof of knowledge. Oliver kept her messages simple and clear, a method and style that some critics took as a weakness. The undecorated phrases and clarity she embraced were part of what made Oliver's writing stand independently.

When I first began studying Oliver's poems for graduate work in the late 1990s, I stumbled into an obscure field of poetic research. For the past twenty years, I have been collecting and documenting Oliver's work. What originated as merely a detailed database listing each piece of work and where it had first appeared in print evolved into a category of poetic research known as genetic criticism. As my gathering of original journal publications swelled, I intensified my attention to detail and began to sift out discoveries—some minuscule, others dramatic.

Genetic criticism can be compared to investigative work: digging deep into early publications, drafts, or notes (if found), and inspecting the rounds of editing that led to later publications or prints. All too often, scholars look no further than the latest print edition. But, my friends, one finds secrecy and concealed splendor in poetry when discovering what waits to be found: everything from evidence of how a poem or theme had evolved before its latest print, to poems published in journals but deemed unfit for a book or anthology. This is where the truth of a poet awaits. What I had unearthed from dusty shelves tells much of Oliver's progress over time.

Vital windows to critical moments in a young poet's life can be unveiled when examining earlier, lesser-known work. In 1956 and 1957, three of Oliver's earliest poems ("Hawks at Task," "The Rabbit," and "The Punishment") appeared in three separate issues of *Vassar Review*, a student-run literary journal funded by Vassar College. Of the three poems, only one appeared in Oliver's first collection, *No Voyage and Other Poems*, published in 1963. Although Oliver has labeled most of her earlier writing as "derivative work," little conjecture is necessary to hypothesize its weight and representation.

Close examination of these poems reveals early traces of identity and self-discovery interwoven with developmental verse—poems remarkably symbolic of the challenges she faced throughout her life: the ways in which

Oliver's actions and words confronted and challenged the barriers of gender and sexual identity in the late 1950s. Imagine the young woman crafting these lines: "The taste of blood upon the tongue / Might make rare music, were it sung, — / But murder in the feathered heart / So sets the criminal apart" ("Hawks at Task"). There is nothing soft in the images portrayed. Although the poem follows numerous traditional regulations, including the iambic beat, first-word capitalization, and a couplet rhyme scheme, the subject matter was unconventional for women at that time. Published more than half a century ago, and a quarter of a century before Oliver's emergence in 1984 as the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, each of these poems clench premature, fragmented traces of Oliver's hallmark voice.

The word *fragmented* is key. Oliver tested various forms and subject matter for nearly two decades. During 1977 and 1978, however, significant changes began to appear in her work, a sudden metamorphosis not only of style and genre but also of theme. Although she had experimented with numerous fauna images, at that time the creature on which Oliver seemed fixated was the bear. Discursive investigation reveals that, by using the image of the bear in verse, Oliver unveils a revolutionary emergence in gender identity parallel to the budding of her voice and work.

Oliver's bear poems evolved from the mid-1970s on through the late 1980s. The inception of the bear can be traced back to the poem "Bears on the Massachusetts Turnpike," published in *Yankee* magazine in 1974. Through this rather simplistic and informative narrative, the reader can question commercial development and its intrusion in nature while simultaneously appreciating modern construction's attempts at accommodating wildlife. "The bear" is vaguely defined, if not overtly generic. The creature is "fattened by berries," "near-sighted, peaceful, [and] sleepy." The poem focuses more on coexistence, describing men as those who love "no thing / So much as sitting down / In tavern." Both the subject and object are plural ("men" and "bears"), with bears addressed androgynously, with no emphasis on traditional or untraditional gender characteristics.

During the following two years, Oliver wrote several additional poems based on the bear, including "The Bear" and "The Truro Bear"; however, "Winter Sleep" represents a crucial shift in the image and representation of the bear, revealing details told through the bear's personified features, actions, and reflections. By 1977, new perspectives of the bear emerged. "Winter Sleep," first published in *Poetry Northwest*, offers an image of the bear both

tantalizing and telling. Contrary to earlier work, the bear's sex was unquestionably female. Using the title the "she-bear," Oliver's strengthening voice ventured bold steps in untouched territory. The poem begins:

> If I could I would
> Go down to winter with the drowsy she-bear,
> Crawl with her under the hillside
> And lie with her, cradled. Like two souls
> In a patchwork bed —

And with lines 20–25, the poem concludes:

> We would sleep and dream.
> We would wake and tell
> How we longed for spring.
> Smiles on our faces, limbs around each other,
> We would turn and turn
> Until we heard our lips in unison sighing.

If read independently, lines 23 to 25 offer an erotic ambiance. And if substituting the bear with one's partner, such sincerity is quite telling. When hypothesizing the dramatic changes that had taken place during this critical period in Oliver's career, evidence is in the text: Oliver had faced conflicting views on sexual representation, hence the sex and gender represented in her work.

Surprisingly, minimal literary criticism of Oliver's work exists; in the 1980s, other than a handful of reviews, there was close to none. To date, Oliver remains a critically undervalued poet.

In 1994, Vicki Graham took an unprecedented step forward in the literary criticism of Oliver. In her essay, "Into the Body of Another: Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," Graham theorizes Oliver's act of becoming one with nature as an ability to "not just . . . cross the boundaries between ourselves and others, but to be divided within ourselves." Graham's theory bases nature—and nature alone—as the Other. Though I agree with Graham's belief that one's "identity is multiple and the boundaries of the self are unstable," a critical fissure exists in Graham's interpretation of Oliver's gender identity and the methods through which her identity is revealed.

Contrary to Graham's theory that Oliver "loses" herself by becoming what is nonhuman—whether that's a bear, whale, tree, or violet—I firmly believe that the transcendence of becoming another represents, if not unveils, Oliver's true self. Through the bear, Oliver's sexual identity is not lost but found and praised. Oliver becomes the bear and presents her sexuality to the reader. She symbolically announces and establishes her beliefs, pleasures, and desires.

The image of the she-bear continued to appear in poems through the 1980s. Through the she-bear, Oliver celebrated specific events and actions, ranging from images of conception and giving birth to nurturing and feeding a cub (child). Likewise, she left the male bear unidentified or secondary. Ultimately, she praised features, traits, and characteristics she found feminine and idyllic.

In contrast to her earlier work and before the publication of *Twelve Moons* (1979), Oliver decided to abandon the narrative as well as personal references. She opted to vacate the "self-examination" of her earlier poems, in which she questioned sexuality and sexual identity. She substituted sexual identity with symbolism and mystic imagery of nature and the wild, as if coming out with the assistance and guidance of various flora and fauna, such as the bear, the sensual taste of honey in the beehive, sleeping in the den, and so forth. At this point, Oliver adopted nature not solely as the core of her work but as a method of representing sensitive matters. Oliver's fresh voice began to emerge well-defined and self-directed.

Writers often break from their norms. In 1999, I read Oliver's short essay, "Building the House," a brief muse on her attempt to build a small cabin in backwoods Massachusetts. She had tried to show the importance of learning traditional construction methods when building from scratch. Her reflection on the "hows" and "whys" of piecing together a building emphasized how much she learned from a hands-on experience. The "house" ended up being more of a small cabin, but she accomplished her goals, both mentally and physically.

Oliver's choice to build a new structure required planning, and it carried surprises. Blueprint set, hammer in hand, connect the Legos as directed. Oliver talked about the obstacles she confronted, most of which she had not unexpected. She learned how not to violate state or town laws and to keep neighbors' rights in mind.

The essay drew me back to a poem Oliver had written in the early 1970s, "New England Houses." The poem speaks of aging tradesmen and carpenters, their traditional methods, hands-on work, and fear of change. Oliver writes that the carpenters were "happiest at [their] tasks of wood, / Shaped and hammered like disciples of time" who "drove the nails in straight and deep, / Pounding for love and a kind of salvation." But she reveals fear, if not anxiety, soon after: "'Now,' said the carpenters, 'the world / has changed.'"

The narrative was a staple in Oliver's earlier work—not necessarily poetry of witness revealing human pain, but vision publicizing personal experiences as a child and young woman. Third-party subjects were common, but images of family were stronger. Oliver's first three books of poetry—*No Voyage and Other Poems* (J.M. Dent, 1963 and Houghton Mifflin, 1965); *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972); and *Twelve Moons* (Little, Brown, 1979)—as well as her first chapbook, *The Night Traveler* (Bits Press, 1978), all include poems about Oliver's childhood, family, and the rural Appalachian community in which she grew up.

Oliver's lyric poems, at times intimate, speak of memories and reflections, both with and without family. "After My Grandfather's Death: A Poem of the China Clock" and "The Grandmothers" provide images of the lifestyle Oliver knew as child. "The Grandmothers" opens with: "They moved like rivers in their mended stockings, / Their skirts, their buns, their bodies grown / Round as trees." Later, a mix of memory and emotion expose the differences between generations, remembering "their hands, swollen and hard as wood."

From the early 1960s on through the late 1970s, kin were common in Oliver's poems. In "Strawberry Moon," Oliver speaks of her great-aunt; in "Dreams," she references her two great-uncles who got lost in Colorado. She talks about her Aunt Elsie and Uncle William in "Aunt Elsie's Night Music." She writes of her mother as a widow in "The Black Walnut Tree." Oliver's poems about her father dig deepest into memories kept quiet for decades. In the chapbook *The Night Traveler*, "Ice" remembers Oliver's father in his last winter, when he had made "ice-grips for shoes / Out of strips of inner tube and scrap metal" and how he "wrapped and mailed / A dozen pairs to me in the easy snows / Of Massachusetts, and a dozen / To my sister, in California." Later in the poem, after Oliver's father passes away, the meaning behind the previous winter's gifts is revealed: "the giving was an asking / a petition."

Following the publication of "Ice," Oliver published only one additional poem about her father, "Poem for My Father's Ghost," unofficially letting go of narrative family images.

Change is constant, never ending. Change cannot be avoided—altered, modified, but not stopped. Oliver's poems went through numerous changes over time. The bold, revealing words of the late 1970s and early 1980s gave way to the prose poem, poems of redemption, poems of lost love, and poems of genuine kindness. While researching and collecting Oliver's work, I was able to identify such changes firsthand. Much of her writing first appeared in more than 100 newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals over the span of 60 years. She published in the *Paris Review, Orion, Ploughshares,* and *Prairie Schooner*. Most journals had the privilege of publishing her work multiple times. Poems in ten different issues of *The American Scholar* stretched from 1963 through 2003. Her work appeared in 15 issues of *Poetry* and 25 issues of the *Amicus Journal/on Earth*. But the one journal that has published the highest number of Oliver's poems is *Appalachia*. In more than 30 issues spanning 27 years, Oliver's poetry has been a staple in the Appalachian Mountain Club's journal—an accomplishment that no other literary journal will ever surpass.

Oliver's first poems to appear in *Appalachia* were "The Gesture" and "The Instant," both published in 1992 (June 15 and December 15) when Sandy Stott was editor-in-chief. From 1992 on, Oliver's writing appeared in nearly every issue. These poems ranged from those about her dogs ("The Dog Has Run Off Again") to more personal reflections ("From this River, When I Was a Child, I Used to Drink").

As the last sentence of Mary Oliver's life ended on January 17, 2019, people around the world suffered multiple levels of sorrow. Suddenly realizing that no new poems or essays would be surprising any readers when paging through the latest issue of *Appalachia* or *Michigan Quarterly Review*, I felt disappointment mixed with grief. But it did not take long to grasp how far Oliver's accomplishments outweigh the work of most of America's contemporary poets. The number and scope of poems published, the obstacles she had overcome, awards received, and praise voiced regularly are all aspirations for other poets and writers.

In closing, a short excerpt from Oliver's prose poem "I Have Decided" (in *A Thousand Mornings*, Penguin Press, 2012) says it best:

> I have decided to find myself a home in the mountains, somewhere high up where one learns to live peacefully in the cold and the silence. It's said that in such a place certain revelations may be discovered. That what the spirit reaches for may be eventually felt, if not exactly understood. Slowly, no doubt. I'm not talking about a vacation.

Mary, what you have created through the years will never halt its inspiration, wonder, and reflection. Your volumes of verse will continue to enlighten those with a love for the wild, just as much as those wild about love: love for one another, love for wonder, love for faith. We know that every second of every day, your soul is at peace in the very same mountains you once envisioned, forever watching the sun rise, hiking in the pinewoods, counting the maple leaves, tasting the joy of honey, and loving everyone and everything around you. In your absence, the world has changed again.

For the past 20 years, Max Stephan has been conducting the most comprehensive textual criticism of Mary Oliver to date: a systematic archaeological gathering of Oliver's work, followed by an archival process of documenting and analyzing publications as far back as the 1950s. Stephan's ever-growing compilation of more than 500 artifacts is one of the largest private collections of its kind nationwide. In addition to *Appalachia*, Stephan's writing has appeared in a wide range of publications, stretching from *The Christian Science Monitor* to *Cimarron Review*. He teaches at Niagara University, specializing in contemporary American poetry. Learn more about his work at maxstephan.net.